Verizon Wireless

Savvy CB Partners' Profile

America's largest and most reliable wireless network now helps construction companies with industry-specific solutions.

By Bobby L. Hickman

While "The Verizon Wireless Network" – the army of hard-hat engineers who doggedly accompany the company's wireless users everywhere – may be a clever advertising campaign, it dramatically illustrates their commitment to providing real-world solutions to their customers' needs. So, when they set aside a segment of that "army" as a dedicated business team for the construction industry, the results can be extraordinary.

Today, construction companies find that "portable office" applications from Verizon Wireless help them to reduce their costs while improving the reliability of their communications. In addition to getting new construction sites up and running quicker – even at remote locations – companies have obtained a variety of efficiency-enhancing benefits from using the Verizon Wireless products and service at their jobsites, such as speeding up voice and email communication between the main office and work sites; accessing project documentation from the field; collecting employee time data faster with fewer errors; and managing projects and their business more efficiently.

Howard Faber, director of strategic business sales for Verizon Wireless' Georgia/Alabama region, explains the company's construction industry team is made up of experts who work with construction companies to help identify solutions to meet their specific needs. That industry focus helps them identify opportunities to drive efficiency, control costs, and reduce "whatever pain they are trying to address," he says.

Through Verizon's joint marketing initiatives, Faber explains, the company works with a number of developers from devices to software to drive innovation and address the specific needs of numerous industries. This kind of innovation will help construction companies streamline their business. For example, the field force manager application has a timekeeping function that lets workers punch in and punch out remotely. It can track when a vehicle needs service, where it is located, even how fast it is traveling at any given time. "So, if a vehicle is traveling at more than 60 miles per hour, the system can send an alert to a certain person," Faber says. And if a company needs to remotely track a project's progress, it can set up a web-cam to post pictures at specific times of the day. Features such as these help large and small companies alike manage their total business.

Other examples include tracking projects and integrating wireless applications with project management software. Managers can better control expenses by tracking employees to ensure they are accurately capturing time and location information. Companies can reduce fuel expenses by mapping routes that people take through a GPS application.

These solutions certainly have been effective for The Circle Group, a leading interior contracting firm in the Southern United States. In the past, when The Circle Group started a project, "we would have to set up operations at each construction site with a telephone, DSL, a fax machine and so forth," explains Brian Brantley, IT manager for the Atlanta-based company. "Now our people basically bring their office with them!"

By using the Verizon Wireless "PC aircard" on his laptop, this construction worker has wireless access to the Internet, advantage of the versatility of his "mobile office."

Today, when a Circle Group employee arrives with a laptop and a wireless Internet card connected to the Verizon Wireless network, he's ready to go. "We don't have to do that initial setup, so we are up and running a lot faster," Brantley says.

The portable office approach is also cost effective and more reliable, Brantley adds. When his group compared the costs of the wireless system to landlines, DSL and all the connections, wireless is cheaper in the long run – especially on smaller, quicker jobs. The approach also avoids common problems at construction sites, such as phone lines being cut.

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shown here taking full

With 100 Circle Group employees on the Verizon Wireless network, spread across the country at job sites, the company's Atlanta headquarters, and in satellite offices in Miami, Myrtle Beach, and Las Vegas, Brantley says it is important for the project team to communicate easily and share documents. Also, in the current economic climate, "we are chasing more jobs outside our typical areas," Brantley states. "So the more we spread out, the more important wireless communication is."

Brantley says The Circle Group selected Verizon Wireless as its provider because the company has better service and coverage than its competitors, particularly on the data side. In fact, Brantley says, he has noticed more general contractors moving to Verizon, which pays dividends for The Circle Group, because in-network calls are free, resulting in additional savings.

Because work sites are often in fairly underdeveloped areas, network coverage is key to the construction industry, according to Faber. To meet this challenge, Verizon maintains the nation's most reliable and largest wireless network – 80 million customers and a service area covering 290 million Americans. On average, Verizon Wireless invests more than $5.5 billion annually to expand and enhance its network. In 2008, the company invested more than $160 million in Georgia alone.

To get the most out of its services, Faber says, the company is seeing a wide adoption of advanced PDA-type devices in the field and extensive use of their push-to-talk service in the construction space especially, although the sector is starting to use other wireless services to stay connected as well. Because Verizon has the largest 3G network in the country, push-to-talk is an even more viable solution, Faber states. "We can provide immediate connection to calling groups with as many as 50 people."

Another application with wide use in construction is "PC aircards" that provide wireless Internet access. Companies obtain remote wireless connections by inserting the card to a laptop or by tethering a PDA/voice device to the laptop. Then workers at the job site can check email, maintain schematics or access information from their back-end systems.

At The Circle Group, Brantley says the company provides field supervisors and office personnel with QNCs (Quick Net Connect, a smart phone running on Windows), which tie into the main server in Atlanta, providing email access and other support. The rest of the company's foremen use G'zOnes, "the tough field phone." The Circle Group also has some 40 wireless PC cards in the field.

Brantley explains that supervisors use QNCs for both telephone and email communication, while PC cards provide virtual private network access from the field. Also, general contractors are sending more addendums and requests for information through email, and those documents are often on a Web site or in a PDF. The remote connection also allows The Circle Group leaders to pull up drawings from their laptops in the field. "It helps them stay on top of things better," Brantley comments. "Now they don't have to wait for information to filter down from the project manager."

Another benefit to the Verizon Wireless technology is the push-to-talk instant communication, made possible with the largest 3G network in the country. Supervisors can set up a network with as many as 50 people.

Mobile access has also been great for time entry. Previously, Brantley says the time sheet would be handwritten and sent via fax to the office, where office staff had to decipher employees' "chicken scratching," which, in turn, led to all sorts of errors. Now the field force inputs the time data online, which eliminates most errors and gives faster turnaround on the information. It also makes daily reporting more efficient.

Also, the system efficiently handles job documentation, especially on bigger projects, Brantley notes. For instance, at one of the company's jobs in downtown Atlanta, there are 30 sets of plans, and addendums are a daily occurrence. Now when an addendum is created, a Circle Group staffer can review it on his computer and determine whether it applies to him. If it does, he forwards it to the project manager and gets the change priced immediately. "Often addendums don't apply to us, but the ones that do affect us sometimes got lost in the mix," Brantley explains. "This way, we can be sure everything gets priced out, and we avoid surprises later."

What's next for enhancing communications? Faber says Verizon's next leap in technology is LTE (long-term evolution), which is basically 4G. "It will give us more than 10 times the bandwidth we currently have on the 3G network, basically the same speed as you get at your desk," Faber explains. Testing will begin later this year, with LTE rolling out in the near future.

Expect those in the commercial construction industry to continue to embrace wireless communication technology as it changes, evolves and improves. "Wireless helps us do more with less," Brantley states. "It allows us to branch out into new areas more easily. We don't have to set up the infrastructure; we just throw our guys in a truck and say, Go!"

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